

Free will & divine
foreknowledge

Remember that the free will defense given in reply to the argument from evil requires an incompatibilist, rather than a compatibilist, view of free will. In this sense, there is a close connection between the main argument against the existence of God and the topic of free will.

But there's also another connection between free will and discussions of the existence and nature of God. This connection comes not from the existence of evil, but rather from a traditional attribute of God: God's omniscience and, in particular, God's knowledge of future events.

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Edwards lays out his argument in four numbered paragraphs, each of which corresponds to a premise in his argument. The first is this one:

1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect: it is now impossible that it should be otherwise than true that that thing has existed.

In other words:

1. We have no choice about past events.

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

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1. We have no choice about past events.

2. If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge, by the supposition, is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise than that this foreknowledge should be, or should have been.

What is Edwards saying here?

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3. It is also very manifest, that those things which are indissolubly connected with other things that are necessary, are themselves necessary. As that proposition whose truth is necessarily connected with another proposition, which is necessarily true, is itself necessarily true. To say otherwise, would be a contradiction:

As elsewhere, Edwards is using “necessary” to mean, in part “beyond our control” or “something we don’t have any choice about.” If we focus on this, then Edwards’ point here looks very similar to one of the key premises in the consequence argument for the incompatibilism of free will and determinism: the no choice principle.

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

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There is one more premise in Edwards' argument which needs discussion.

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4. It is no less evident, that if there be a full, certain, and infallible foreknowledge of the future existence of the volitions of moral agents, then there is a certain infallible and indissoluble connexion between those events and that foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events;

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Edwards is saying that there is an **indissoluble** connection between something being known, and its being true. An indissoluble connection is one that cannot be broken - i.e., a connection which is impossible to break. Another way to put this is to say that the connection between something being known and its being true is a necessary one.

For our purposes, what is important is that **if something is a necessary truth, it is not something that we have any choice about**. We don't, for example, have any choice about the fact that there are no round squares -- and this is precisely because it is impossible for there to be any round squares. And this is just another way of saying that it is a necessary truth that there aren't any.

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So let's suppose we grant Edwards' claim that

Necessarily, if someone knows that p, then p.

It seems to follow from this, given what we have just said, that the following is also true:

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

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But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

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But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

Premise 3 mentions something that we have no choice about.

Premise 5 says that if we have no choice about that thing, then we have no choice about our future actions.

Premise 4 says that if both those things are the case, then we also have no choice about our future actions.

Therefore, it seems to follow from premises 3-5 that:

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform some future action.

But of course, if this is true, then we have no free will.

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This argument is similar in form to the consequence argument. In that argument we assumed that determinism is true and derived the result that we have no choice about future actions. That argument, if successful, established the conditional claim that **if** determinism is true, **then** we have no free will.

In **this** argument we assume not that determinism is true, but rather that God knows what actions we will perform in the future. From this assumption we derived the result that we have no choice about future actions. **So this argument, if successful, establishes the conditional claim that if God knows of our future actions, then we have no free will.**

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On the face of it, there are four premises which one might reject: 1, 2, 4, and 5. But it is worth noting at the outset that there is an immediate problem, from the point of view of the religious believer, with rejecting premise 4.

One of the important aspects of free will, from the point of religious belief, is that it promises to explain the existence of certain sorts of evil in the world. But, as we noted in our discussion of the free will defense, this sort of explanation only makes sense if free will is incompatible with determinism.

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The problem which arises is that premise 4 is a crucial premise in the main argument for incompatibilism. So if the religious believer tries to solve the problem created by Edwards' argument by rejecting premise 4 of that argument, she also weakens substantially the case for incompatibilism, and thereby weakens substantially the free will defense as a reply to the problem of evil.

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In what follows, I will therefore just suppose that premise 4 is true. How else might one reply to Edwards' argument?

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One main problem with Aquinas' response to this argument is not that what Aquinas says about God existing outside of time is false, but that, even if he is right, there seems to be a way to reformulate Edwards' argument and still show the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge.

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One assumption of the argument is that God knew **in the past** what we will do; and this seems to imply that God exists in time. This view of the relationship between God and time was denied by Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas on time and foreknowledge

"although contingent things become actual successively, nevertheless God knows contingent things not successively, as they are in their own being, as we do but simultaneously. The reason is because His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His being; and eternity being simultaneously whole comprises all time, as said above ... Hence all things that are in time are present to God from eternity, not only because He has the types of things present within Him, as some say; but because His glance is carried from eternity over all things as they are in their presentality."

If Aquinas is right about this, then it looks like premise 2 of Edwards' argument is false.

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Here is one way such a reformulation might work. We might restate premises 1 and 2 so as still to derive 3. From there, the argument could go as above:

- 1*. We have no choice about **things which are outside of time**.
- 2*. God's knowledge of our future actions is **outside of time**.
3. We have no choice about God's having knowledge of our future actions. (1*, 2*)

Are premises 1* and 2* as plausible as the original premises 1 and 2? If so, then Aquinas' view shifts the problem of free will and foreknowledge, but does not solve it.

How might Aquinas argue that 1*, unlike 1, is false?

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Aquinas' objection focuses on premise 2 of Edwards' argument. A quite different reply focuses on premise 1 of Edwards' argument.

This reply to the problem of free will and foreknowledge is often associated with William of Ockham, an English philosopher and theologian who was born about 15 years after Aquinas' death, in 1288.



The denial of premise 1 might, at first glance, seem ridiculous. Absent time machines, how can we have power over the past?

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To see why this might not be ridiculous, consider the overlooked philosophical problem of the incompatibility of free will and roommate foreknowledge.

It seems that sometimes, your roommate can know what you will do; for example, the following might be true:

As 10 am today, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now imagine that at noon you are in the dining hall, about to grab a hamburger, when you are suddenly overcome with an unlikely desire for a fish sandwich. Do you have a choice about whether you will choose the hamburger or the fish sandwich? It seems that you do. But then it also seems that you have a choice about whether your roommate, at 10 am, knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch. After all, if you had chosen the fish sandwich, your roommate's belief that you would eat a hamburger would have been false, and hence **not** a piece of knowledge.

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But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Another question you may want to consider: do you have a choice about whether, at 10 am, it was **true** that you would eat a hamburger for lunch? If so, how would this affect the Master Argument for fatalism?

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Now can you imagine a variant of the case in which you have a choice about whether your roommate even *believed* that you would eat a hamburger for lunch?

This does not seem possible: it seems that while you do have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past knew something about your behavior, you do not have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past believed something about your behavior. This might lead you to think that there are some past events that we do have a choice about, and some that we do not. This is what Ockham thought. One might express this idea by saying that some facts about the past are **hard facts** -- facts about which we have no choice -- whereas other facts about the past are **soft facts** -- facts about which we do have a choice.

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Let's grant that there is such a distinction between hard and soft facts. For Ockham's reply to this argument to work, we need more than the idea that there is such a distinction: we also need to assume that facts about what God knows are soft facts.

At first, this might seem very plausible: after all, we have already seen that facts about what your roommate knows are soft facts. Why not then also facts about what God knows?

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But think for a moment about why you had some control over whether, two hours ago, your roommate knew what you would do: this was because you had the power to do something which is such that, if you did that thing, your roommate's belief would have been false, and hence would not have been knowledge. But do we have the power to do something which is such that, if we did that thing we would have made one of God's beliefs false? This seems unlikely; it does not seem to be within our power to make God less than omniscient.

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This reply to the problem of free will and foreknowledge is often associated with William of Ockham, an English philosopher and theologian who was born about 15 years after Aquinas' death, in 1288.



But think for a moment about why you had some control over whether, two hours ago, your roommate knew what you would do: this was because you had the power to do something which is such that, if you did that thing, your roommate's belief would have been false, and hence would not have been knowledge. But do we have the power to do something which is such that, if we did that thing we would have made one of God's beliefs false? This seems unlikely; it does not seem to be within our power to make God less than omniscient.

So why might facts about what God knew 1000 years ago be soft facts, rather than hard facts? This is the key question which defenders of Ockham's solution to this problem must answer. That is, they must explain why it is the case that

Even though it is impossible for me to change the past, it is now in my power to perform some action which is such that, if I performed that action, God would have had different beliefs 1000 years ago.

The difficulty for the defender of this solution is, that is, to explain how what God believed 1000 years ago is not something which is now completely out of my control.

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

1. We have no choice about past events.
 2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
 3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
 4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.
 5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.
- C. We have no choice about whether we will perform some future action.

The strategies of Aquinas and Ockham are each ways of trying to show that free will and divine foreknowledge are **compatible**. But one might, of course, also simply accept Edwards' argument, and say that divine foreknowledge and free will are **incompatible**.

Defenders of this position must, then, either deny that we have free will, or deny that God knows in advance what we are going to do. We have already considered some of the problems with denying the existence of free will; let's consider whether it is plausible to deny the existence of divine foreknowledge. (We're asking, of course, whether it is plausible for a religious believer to deny divine foreknowledge; atheists of course deny that there is any such thing.)

An initial problem facing this strategy is to explain why this is not simply a denial of the thesis that God is omniscient.

Here I think that one who denies divine foreknowledge should say something like this:

"To say that God is omniscient is to say that God knows all the facts. To deny that God is omniscient, then, is to say that there is at least one fact that God does not know. But I am not saying that. I am not saying that because, while I **am** saying that God does not know whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song, I am **not** saying that there is a fact about whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song. I don't think that there are such facts; indeed, I don't think that there are any facts (yet) about which free actions I will and will not perform. So, I don't think that there are any facts that God does not know."

Is this a sufficient reply to the objection? What would Aristotle have to say about the denial of the claim that there are any truths about the future?

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A second kind of worry about the denial of divine foreknowledge comes specific views which are a part of the beliefs of various religions.

In the case of Christianity, for example, various passages in both the Old and New Testaments seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge. Consider, for example the following well-known passage from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is speaking to Peter:

"Truly, I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."

One who denies divine foreknowledge seems forced into saying either that Jesus did not really know what he said, or that Peter's denial was not free. One thing to think about is whether these are the only options, and whether either of these is plausible.

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